

Special to The Morning Sun by Crawford County Native and Author

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Route 66 on Television: Cool Corvettes and Characters

“Get your motor runnin, head out on the highway, lookin’ for adventure...”

- Steppenwolf

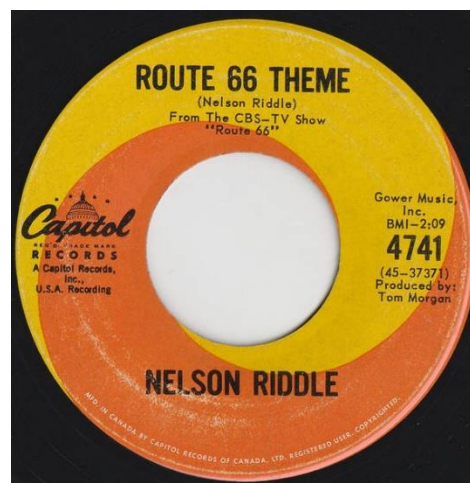
[Author’s note: expect recollections concerning the contributions, cities, and sights of Route 66 during its heyday to “rev up” during the next few years; its 100th anniversary will be celebrated in 2026. In fact, in late 2020 Congress passed a law establishing the U.S. Route 66 Centennial Commission to oversee the celebration.]

Part 2

Songs, Stars, and Some Program Facts

The Show’s Theme Song

In addition to the show’s two leading men, guest stars, and Corvettes, a popular aspect of the TV show was its "Route 66 Theme" song, written by Nelson Riddle and released on Jan. 1, 1962. The song reached No. 30 on the Billboard Hot 100 list and was nominated for two Grammy awards. [To hear it, Google: Route 66 tv show theme song; then click on the link.] Note that this song is not to be confused with that which was written in 1946 by Bobby Troup - (Get Your Kicks on) Route 66 - which was also a huge hit and recorded by a number of renowned performers (Nat King Cole being the first; later, The Rolling Stones.



As indicated in Part 1, nearly all Route 66 filming was done in actual locations, not on constructed Hollywood sound stages. The film “sets” were actual towns, large and small, in nearly half the states in the U.S.

The opening shots of the program always showed Tod and Buz at a distance, cruising in their Corvette on an open highway or city street. A lot of dialogue between the two occurred inside and around the Corvette. To capture the talk, the crew would attach cameras to the side of the car for those shots, rigging extra lighting on the floor of the cockpit.

Tod and Buz were often filmed in the Corvette from behind as they traveled the highway. For those shots the crew used a different Chevrolet model: a Corvair. With its trunk in the front and engine in the rear, the Corvair enabled the crew to film scenes by mounting cameras in its front (trunk) end, then film the scene as they followed the Corvette down the highway.



Filming the Route 66 Corvette on the road using a 1962 Corvair. Photo credit: GM Authority

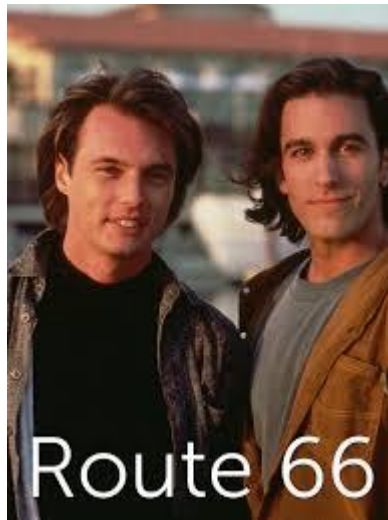
Other Facts about the Series

- George Maharis fooled Chevy into giving him a Corvette. As mentioned earlier, Chevrolet was a “Route 66” sponsor. George Maharis didn’t own a car when the series began. But he wanted a new Corvette for himself, so he made up a story in order to get one. He told the Chevrolet bosses that “we may have a little problem.” The problem, according to Maharis, was that he owned a Ford Thunderbird, which he would be forced to drive to the film locations. Hearing this, Chevrolet immediately gave him the Corvette he wanted. In truth, as mentioned in Part 1, all filming was done in many states and locations so there was no single, constructed film “set”; the crew traveled from state to state in trucks and vans.

- Interestingly, although popular for its time, the program never scored particularly high in the Nielsen television ratings. For example, for its maiden season of the October 1960-April 1961 ratings period, Route 66 scored 30th of 30 programs listed. For the October 1961-April 1962 ratings period, it failed to make even the top 30. For the October 1962-April 1963 period it scored 27th; and for October 1963-April 1964 it failed again to score among the top 30 programs. Bear in mind, however, that competition was very keen during those years, with Route 66 going against such aforementioned programs as Gunsmoke, Wagon Train, Have Gun – Will Travel, The Andy Griffith Show, The Beverly Hillbillies, Candid Camera, and Rawhide.
- Route 66 TV filming required a traveling production crew of 50 people, two new Corvettes, two tractor trailers, and other assorted vehicles - one of the largest mobile film operations in TV history.
- One episode, *I'm Here to Kill a King*, was scheduled to air on November 29, 1963, but was pushed back into 1964 due to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.
- Each episode generally revolved around that week's featured guest actor; many of them went on to be film stars in their own right. Furthermore, the program's popularity meant that it could attract and afford Hollywood's "A-List" actors of the era. The following actors appeared in multiple episodes of the series: Robert Redford, Ed Asner, Lon Chaney, Jr., Robert Duvall, Peter Graves, Ben Johnson, Suzanne Pleshette, DeForest Kelley, Lee Marvin, Chill Wills, Barbara Eden, Michael Rennie, Julie Newmar, Inger Stevens, Pat Hingle, Dan Duryea, Marion Ross, Denver Pyle. [Note: an interview with Suzanne Pleshette concerning an experience with the Route 66 TV show may be seen at: <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/shows/route-66>, or Google: Suzanne Pleshette Television Academy Route 66)]
- Actors who appeared in one episode included: Stefanie Powers, Tom Bosley, Joseph Campanella, John Astin, Rip Torn, James Whitmore, Sorrell Booke, Jean Stapleton, James Coburn, William Shatner, Noah Beery, Jr., Joey Heatherton, Walter Matthau, James Farentino, Soupy Sales, Gene Hackman, Richard Mulligan, Ron Howard, Harry Guardino, E.G. Marshall, Tina Louise, Donna Douglas, Martin Sheen, Lynda Day George, Michael Parks, Lee Meriwether, Rod Steiger, Chad Everett, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., James Caan, Darren McGavin,

Michael J. Pollard, Slim Pickens, Joan Crawford, Claude Akins, Peter Lorre, George Kennedy, Burt Reynolds, Boris Karloff, David Janssen, Alan Alda, Joe E. Brown, Vera Miles, Tuesday Weld, Cloris Leachman, and Jack Lord. [The full cast of Route 66 may be found here: <https://www.themoviedb.org/tv/2181-route-66/cast?language=en-US>.]

- CBS executives were initially concerned about the seriousness of the series and its political undertones, so it's claimed that they ordered the show's producer to add more "broads, bosoms, and fun" to the episodes. The producers thus introduced young female guest stars (like some of those actresses named above) to provide more romance opportunities for Tod and Buzz.
- In 1993, about three decades after the original program ended, a summer series on NBC put Buz's illegitimate son at the wheel of a red 1961 Corvette. The story line had "Nick" inheriting his dad's (Buz's) Corvette and picking up a hitchhiker, "Arthur." However, while this new version of Route 66 TV only produced four episodes, it fostered other TV series about wandering Good Samaritans who performed good deeds on their travels (such as The Fugitive, Run for Your Life, Highway to Heaven, and Touched by an Angel).



The 1993 version of Route 66 on TV lasted four episodes. Photo credit: TV Guide

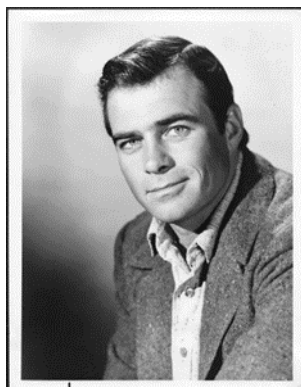
Martin Milner driving the Corvette as always...but with a different passenger

There came a point in Season 3 of the original series when George Maharis, who had appeared in a total of 82 episodes, left the show. Maharis cited health problems, including hepatitis. He returned to the program in the spring of 1962, but after filming several episodes he complained that he was having to work excessive hours and left again. He later said: "If I keep going at the present pace, I'm a fool. Even if you have

\$4,000,000 in the bank, you can't buy another liver." Maharis added in a 2007 interview with Route 66 News that "We worked six days a week, sometimes seven, because we were always behind schedule. You got up at 5 in the morning, and you get back to your motel at 7 or 9 at night, sometimes even later."

Maharis' leaving brought about a legal battle and more unkind words when he soon began looking for other TV work. In June 1963 he was slotted to sing on the Ed Sullivan Show. However, the Route 66 TV producers argued that he was still under contract to them, and that ultimately prevented his appearing on Sullivan's program. The producers also claimed that Maharis was faking illness in order to break his contract, to either renegotiate for more money or leave altogether for other programs. They said Maharis had shown "no regard for this company, his co-star, Marty Milner, and the 50 or 60 other people on the show." Maharis fired back, saying "There isn't any more Old Hollywood where a company can buy movie stars like pieces of meat." For his part, Milner was quoted in TV Guide saying that "Maharis and I got along fine, until I found out he didn't like me."

Eventually, Maharis won his legal argument that his contract was void, and he returned to film Route 66 in July 1963. But by then the show's appeal (and ratings) had declined – particularly after Glenn Corbett came in to replace Buz in March 1963 as "Linc" Case. The show quickly focused more heavily on Martin Milner's character, while the new Linc became more of a supporting player - portraying a Vietnam war hero trying to find himself. But Linc never found favor with audiences, and *Route 66* was canceled in March 1964. The executive producer stated that "We knew when George left the show it was over...the audience got bored. It's really sad, when you think about the show's potential."

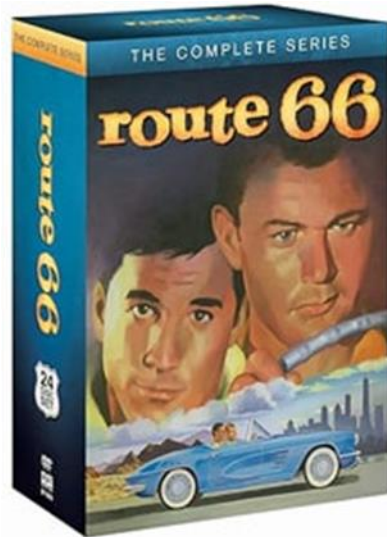


Glenn Corbett

Glenn Corbett was both a lead and supporting actor. After serving in the Navy as a Seabee, he began to take roles in campus theatricals, where he was "discovered" and signed a contract with Columbia Pictures. He continued making theatrical films in the

1970s and had supporting roles in two of John Wayne's westerns, Chisum and Big Jake. Throughout the '80s he kept busy as a regular in the long-running series Dallas. He died of lung cancer in Dallas in Jan. 1993 at age 59. Photo credit: Ebay

Route 66 on Disc and in Literature



A complete 24-disc series of the Route 66 television programs is available from both Ebay and Amazon. In addition, several books are available on Amazon concerning the series, and a 2.5-hour documentary with Martin Milner takes you along as he revisits The Mother Road's people and places to see how America has changed since the series ended (note: some reviews say the video quality is not particularly good).

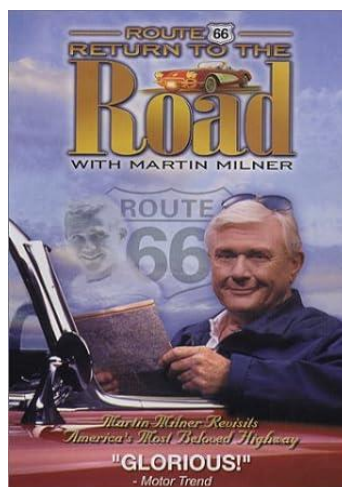
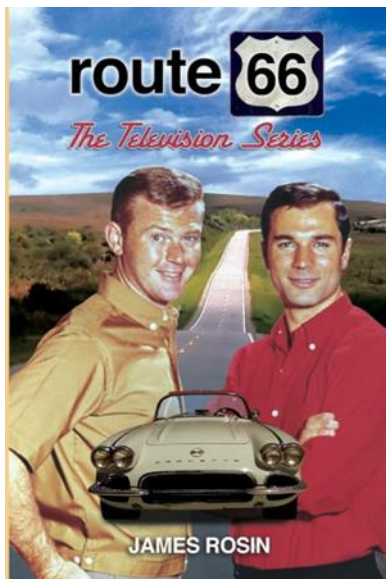


Photo credits: Amazon

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